

## **From A to Zen – Exploring the Wisdom of China – Part 4 of 7**

*This series was originally published in 2009 in the Kelton Times Magazine in Dalian, People's Republic of China, and came to an abrupt halt when the publishers discontinued the publication.*

### **Foreword**

In the last edition we looked at contemporary China and saw how ancient ideas from traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism are still significant in shaping today's society. They are part of a larger body of intangible cultural heritage which is being compiled by the Chinese State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH). Some scholars argue that, as Chinese society is diversifying, there is increasing social space, allowing certain ideologies, religions and philosophies to revive and flourish. The second World Buddhist Forum held this year in China is an example of this. We also introduced the philosopher Alan Watts, who is credited as having been the foremost interpreter of Eastern Philosophies to a Western audience in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Beyond time, beyond words... because ideas matter**

What is it then about these ancient ways of life that finds resonance in a modern society? Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism are over two and a half thousand years old and are based on ideas and practices that are even older. What do they offer to the citizen of the 21<sup>st</sup> century who lives in a world which is apparently so different to that of times past? Globalisation and technology have shrunk distances and increased speeds, bringing cultures and different regions into closer contact with each other. Technology and mass media have vastly enhanced our means of communication allowing for a cross fertilisation of ideas and beliefs. Unprecedented economic growth and industrial development have allowed for commodities to be produced in abundance, alleviating the strain of daily chores for many and giving a sense of material wealth to millions around the world. Education and knowledge are sophisticated and widely available and information is more accessible than ever. We have entered into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and it is sometimes not quite clear whether we are in the silicone, information, quantum, post-modern or transition age, because things are changing so fast. Yet, while on the surface the world appears unrecognizably different from 2000 years ago, the fundamental factors underlying people's wellbeing and sense of meaning, in other words their perceived quality of life, remain almost unchanged.

Emotions and expectations, the longing for meaning and direction, the occurrence of fortune and misfortune, the mystery of life and death, bliss and suffering - all these are inseparable from the human experience of life. These are the timeless qualities of existence faced by generation after generation, and whether we ignore or investigate them, we are all affected by them.

Now the interesting thing is that different cultures have reacted quite differently to these timeless human experiences and have developed

fundamentally different mythologies to understand them. There was a framed prayer in my grandfather's living room, for instance, which read:

*Dear Lord,  
give me the courage to change what is changeable,  
the strength to accept what is unchangeable,  
and the wisdom to distinguish the two from each other.*

Indeed, this is an ability, which is practically speaking, useful to everyone at any time. From a Far Eastern perspective, however, the reference to a god would seem unnecessary since here there is no comparable tradition of monotheism. Instead, we can find the *Tao*, most often translated as *the Way*.

While in the Bible it is written that in the beginning was the word, and the word was God and that furthermore, God created the heavens and the earth, in Chinese mythology there is no such sharp distinction between a creator, as it were, and 'his' creation. Taoism, for instance, can be said to regard what there is as a wholeness; what is, simply is, in itself and by itself; creator, creation, and destruction are all of one and the same nature and inseparable.

The most influential Taoist text, the Tao Te Ching, was written sometime between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and is often attributed to Lao Tzu, however, this is matter of debate. It sets out a markedly different understanding of nature and the human's place in it.

It begins with these lines:

**Even the finest teaching is not the Tao itself.  
Even the finest name is insufficient to define it.  
Without words, the Tao can be experienced,  
and without a name, it can be known.**

The only reason in the first place to attempt to fit this worldview into concepts and words is given in a following paragraph:

**Though words or names are not required  
to live one's life this way,  
to describe it, words and names are used,  
that we might better clarify  
the way of which we speak,  
without confusing it with other ways  
in which an individual might choose to live.**

The Tao Te Ching is a very concise text, consisting of about 5,000 Chinese characters written in a poetic language. The briefness is due to the philosophy it describes: *Teaching without words, performing without actions, that is the Master's way.*

In its very essence Taoism states that the universe is in unique harmony, acting according to its own ways. If we go against this harmony, we will

encounter hardship and face difficulties, but if we develop a feeling for the way of the universe and learn to move in accordance with it, life flows by itself and we move harmoniously with it.

A popular metaphor is found in water as the Tao Te Ching continues:

**Great good is said to be like water,  
sustaining life with no conscious striving,  
flowing naturally, providing nourishment,  
found even in places  
which desiring man rejects.**

**In this way  
it is like the Tao itself.**

### **The story of the farmer**

The other day I was walking out of a shopping centre when I found a 10 RMB note which somebody had just dropped. I picked it up and stood there for a moment to see if anybody would turn around and claim it. As I did, I saw a Chinese man who had also found a 10 RMB note. He saw me standing there and asked me if the one he had found was mine. I told him that it wasn't but that I had found one, too. We stood there for a few moments looking around and then decided that whoever had lost the money was probably unaware of it and gone by now. 'Well,' I said smiling, 'It's our lucky day today', to which he plainly responded: 'Maybe'. We both left.

His reply made me laugh as it reminded me of a story Alan Watts tells in one of his lectures; a story that illustrates beautifully a certain kind of wisdom which is not untypical for China and the lands of the Far East.

In ancient China there lived a farmer with his family. Their home was on the outskirts of a remote village and for the daily chores and the work on the fields they had only one horse to help them. One day – no one knew how it had happened – the horse ran away! The farmer's wife was very sad and complained to the farmer how bad this was and how hard life would get now. He just replied 'maybe'.

A few days later, when they were out at work they saw their horse in the distance. It was coming back and, not just that, a wild horse had followed it and was walking alongside theirs. Both horses were soon back in the paddock, next to the stables. The wife and the son were delighted and could not contain their happiness. Why, now they had two horses! Some neighbours who had heard of the event came round and told the farmer how lucky he was, to which he simply replied 'maybe'.

A week later, when it was a nice day, the farmer's son decided that it was time to break the horse in. After all, it was still wild, and as such, of not much use

to them. He went outside and, with the help of some of the neighbours, managed to get on it. The horse, however, was quite furious and soon threw the son of its back. Hitting the hard ground rather inconveniently he broke his leg and screamed in pain. 'What a tragedy!' All the men instantly agreed. The wife was devastated. How could this have happened? This was such a stroke of bad luck! 'We are so unfortunate' she said. Her husband looked at her and said 'maybe'.

The day came to an end and a dark night fell over the country. The next morning a division of the emperor's army came into the village with an officer who called out a conscription order. The soldiers went to every house and, where they would find any young men, take them with them to join the army. Fathers shouted and mothers wept. There was much sorrow.

When they came to the farmer's house they demanded to see the son. Seeing him in bed with a broken leg they decided that he was of no use to them and so, left again.

When the neighbours heard of this, they came to the farmer's house. 'Why, you are so lucky,' they said, 'they came and took our sons today, but yours, they didn't take, how fortunate for you!'

To this the farmer simply replied 'Maybe'.

### **Comment**

One could obviously continue this story indefinitely and the only thing one is sure to find is an endless chain of events – one leading to another. Indeed, believing that they are separate events might be a flawed assumption in the first place. Perhaps they are better regarded as an endless stream out of which we pick so-called events, merely for our convenience. This story shows how people are quick to judge. They say *this* is good and *that* is bad. When they find something they think of themselves as lucky and when they lose it they perceive it as misfortune. They gain something and are happy, but then are sad when it is lost. Through this they are easily disturbed, and easily enthralled, glad in one moment and upset in the next, and always ready to deem something good or bad. In fact, they are all too quick and far too ready to distinguish between good things and bad things, fortune and misfortune.

What about the farmer then? Every time his wife or the neighbours are either happy or sad about something that happens, he seems indifferent, answering always with a 'maybe'. While the others are quickly disturbed or excited by the events, he seems to stay the same. While the others experience the highs and lows of their emotions, he seems undaunted. You can make up your own mind as to why this is so and if this is desirable, but it seems to me that the farmer does not judge the things happening to him on a per-instance basis. He does not categorise his experiences into good and bad, right and wrong, fortunate and unfortunate. *He simply experiences*. He accepts what happens and takes it as it is: undistinguished, spontaneous, and whole. He

seems to recognise that in this world every coin has two sides, every action involves an equal and opposite reaction, every effect is also a cause and every acquired right comes with a duty; in other words, that everything is connected, one thing leads to another and everything flows like a river. This is inescapable. The farmer knows this and therefore follows life like water down a river.

In another translation the Tao Te Ching says:

**If you work by the way,  
you will be of the way;  
If you work through its virtue  
You will be given the virtue;  
Abandon either one  
And both abandon you**

And,

**In this world,  
Compare those of the way  
To torrents that flow  
Into river and sea**

## **Epilogue**

While this particular farmer might have lived at any time in any place in the world, the story is from China and this is not incidental. It reflects a way of looking at things that can be found in the teachings of Chinese philosophical and religious traditions, particularly Taoism. It is an integral part of the culture and as such it shines through in various forms everywhere, from arts to politics to everyday life. This is perhaps the reason why the man who found the 10 RMB note just replied 'maybe' when I proclaimed that it was our lucky day.

By the way, the next day I gave the 10 RMB I had found to a disabled man who was drawing colourful Chinese calligraphy on the street near Xi'an lu, in Dalian's West End. As I dropped it into his bucket I saw how his eyes caught a glimpse of the note and registered the value. He seemed to appreciate it.

## **Taosim in Liaoning**

For those intent on travelling and exploring the area, there is a Taoist palace on Dachangshan Island, which is located off the East coast of the Liaodong peninsula. It is the largest of its kind in southern Liaoning and is situated approximately 100 kilometres north-east of Dalian. It is called Ternary Palace (Sanyuan Gong) and was first built in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties. In its present form it covers an area of around 3600 square metres. It boasts outstanding architecture featuring the Sanqing Temple, Kwun Yam Temple,

Mazu Temple, Kuang Kung Temple and another six temples for Taoist worshipping. The address is: Beishan Park, Dachangshan Island, Changhai County.

Closer to Dalian there is the Taoist Tangwangdian Temple. This is situated on Da Hei Shan, the Big Black Mountain in Dalian's Development Zone, Kai Fa Qu, about three kilometres from Jinzhou. A number of buses running from Dalian to Jinzhou can take you to the foot of the mountain, from where you have to walk the rest.